The Woodcutter's Christmas

—BY—

LINWOOD TAFT, Ph. D.

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The Woodcutter's Christmas

A Play for Children

By LINWOOD TAFT, Ph. D.

Chairman Pageants and Festivals Drama League of America.
Director, American Pageant Association.

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ELDRIDGE ENTERTAINMENT HOUSE,
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PS635
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Characters

WOODCUTTER

WIFE

OLGA—Their eldest child, about twelve.

JOHN—About ten years old.

FREDERICK

HENRY Twins, eight years old.

ELIZABETH—The youngest, five or six years old.

THE CHILD—A large doll may be used.

★

ACT I.

Two nights before Christmas.

ACT II.

The night before Christmas.

ACT III.

Christmas morning.

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no 1

The Woodcutter's Christmas

The stage is set as a living room or kitchen in a peasant's cottage. There may be a fireplace at the right front with a table and chairs near it. A door at right rear leads into kitchen or other small room. A door at left rear opens into the yard. There is a window at left front. Other furniture may be placed as needed.

As the curtain rises the Wife is sitting by the table mending. Olga and Henry are playing cat's-cradle. Elizabeth is watching them. They are singing a Christmas carol as the curtain rises. Any old carol or appropriate Christmas song is suitable. At the end of the carol Elizabeth speaks.

ELIZABETH—How long is it now, Mother, before Christmas?

WIFE—Only one day more and then Christmas Day.

HENRY—And when do we put our shoes by the fire for St. Nicholas to fill?

WIFE—Tomorrow night when you go to bed you may leave your shoes out. But, who knows? You may find them filled with twigs.

HENRY—Why should they be filled with twigs? I've been a good boy all the year.

OLGA—A good boy all the year! Who could it have been that ran off with 'Lizbeth's doll yesterday and pretended that he had thrown it in the fire?

WIFE—And who could it have been that chased the cat into the pantry and frightened her so that she knocked over the pitcher of milk?

OLGA—And last week who slid off the roof of the shed and tore great holes in his clothes?

HENRY—Well, maybe I did; but I didn't mean to be bad.

OLGA—"Didn't mean to" never helped anybody yet after the harm was done.

HENRY—Well, you needn't be so goody-goody. Who was it pulled brother John's hair and scratched his face?

OLGA—He called me names. I guess you'd—

WIFE—(*interrupting*) Children! Children! No more squabbling. The good saint will never visit a house where there is always quarrelling and hard words. He gives only to good children.

OLGA—I could be good and gentle if the boys weren't always teasing me.

HENRY—And so could I be good if I had some nice toys to play with. Then I wouldn't always have to be looking around for something to do. Oh, I do hope Saint Nicholas brings me a goat and a cart and a harness with a silver bell on it.

WIFE—Goats and carts and silver bells are for the sons of rich men. Your father is a poor woodcutter and you must be satisfied with simple gifts—if you are lucky enough to get any at all.

OLGA—(*putting arm around mother's neck*) I know how hard you work, Mother dear, and how father walks all the way down the mountain, through the town and up the other mountain, over there to the forest where he cuts wood all day so that he may have money to buy us food and clothes. But I do wish I could have a new dress with a silken sash and a pretty blue ribbon for my hair.

HENRY—I asked Daddy this morning to tell Saint Nicholas that I want some new skates, a red cap, a watch, *and* the goat.

WIFE—I wish you might have such fine presents, but poor children must be content with simple things and be thankful that there is bread and soup enough so that they will not be hungry.

(*John and Frederick come in carrying or dragging after them a small evergreen tree.*)

JOHN—See what a fine tree we have!

FREDERICK—And we got another one bigger than this, to set up in the yard for the birds. (*Goes to the window and points.*) See? It is there by the gate.

WIFE—(*after looking out*) It is too dark to see well, but I'm sure it's a fine tree. The birds will have a great feast on the grain we will fasten to it.

FREDERICK—They'll be glad it's Christmas, I guess.

ELIZABETH—As glad as we are, won't they?

WIFE—It is past the time for your father to come. He is late tonight. Put the tree in the corner there, John. Olga, get the table ready for supper. (*They do as told.*) John, (*hesitating slightly*) did you hear any wolves as you came from the forest?

JOHN—Not a single howl, Mother. I hope Father gets me the dog I asked him to bring me. Then I can go to the woods any time I like and not think of wolves.

(*As John speaks the Wife opens the door and looks anxiously down the hill. After a moment she waves her hand in greeting.*)

WIFE—Here he is, now. You were so late I was almost frightened. What kept you?

(*The children run towards the door with shouts of "Daddy," "What did you bring me for Christmas?" "May I have it now?" They stop suddenly as he appears in the doorway with nothing in his hands, but his ax.*)

WOODCUTTER—The snow was deep and I had to walk slowly. (*Noticing the sudden quiet of the children.*) What's the matter? Nobody a kiss for Daddy?

HENRY—I thought you stopped in the town to buy my skates and a red cap and a goat and—

ELIZ.—(*suddenly sitting flat on the floor and beginning to cry*) I want my dolly! I want my dolly!

OLGA—I wanted a dress and a sash and a blue ribbon for my hair.

JOHN—You said you would stop in the town and see about my dog.

FRED.—I told you I wanted a sled, but you haven't brought me even—a—stick—of—candy!

(*Wife puts soup and bread on the table.*)

WOODCUTTER—Children! Children! Did I really promise to buy you presents tonight? John did I tell you I would buy you a dog?

JOHN—N-no, I guess you didn't say so for sure.

WOODCUTTER—Henry, did I promise to get you all those things?

HENRY—I wanted you to get them, and I *asked* you to get them, and you said—

WOODCUTTER—(*leaning down to hug him*) All right, Son, what did I say?

HENRY—(*after a struggle with himself*) I guess, maybe, you said you'd see what you could find.

WOODCUTTER—(*swinging Elizabeth to his shoulder*) And so you want a doll, and Olga wants a dress with a silken sash, and a blue ribbon, and Fred, here, wants a sled. (*Suddenly serious*) I wish I could persuade St. Nicholas to bring you all everything that you want. But you mustn't expect that much. I do promise, though, (*holding up one hand*) solemnly, to stop in the town on my home tomorrow night and get something for each of you. Fred may get only a stick of candy instead of a sled, and I don't know where John would get bones for a dog. It is all we can do to get bread and soup for all of us. But we will see. Let's have supper now. Sit down, children, and give thanks to the good God who has supplied us with food to eat, clothes to wear, and fire to warm us. (*They sit at the table or stand near it with clasped hands and closed eyes for a moment. As they begin to eat, the Wife moves around to the left of the Woodcutter and speaks to him so that the children do not hear.*)

WIFE—Did you get out of the forest before the wolves began to howl?

WOODCUTTER—Yes. But just as I left the forest I heard a cry. It sounded very strange. (*As though trying to reassure himself.*) It must have been a panther or a wildcat, even if it did sound almost like a child. I started to go back but I was already late and I remembered my promise to you to leave the forest before dark so I came on. It *must* have been a wild animal, but the cry stayed in my ears all the way home. I can hear it yet. What if it was a child?

WIFE—Thank God you didn't turn back. It was surely a wild beast hunting for its supper. Now, eat yours in peace and safety.

CURTAIN

ACT II.

The scene is the same as in Act I. It is now Christmas Eve. The evergreen tree is set upon the table at the rear center of the stage. There is room to pass behind it. There are four candles on the table to light the tree, which is decorated with strings of berries and such simple ornaments. As the curtain rises, the five children are dancing around the tree, hands joined, singing a carol. At the end of the carol, they gather in a group at the front of the stage.

HENRY—I *hope* Daddy brings me some skates and a red cap and a goat and wagon, and a harness with a silver bell.

JOHN—And I hope he brings me a dog. He could catch rabbits and squirrels to eat and he would scare the wolves away.

ELIZABETH—(*jumping up and down and clapping her hands*) My daddy's going to bring me a doll! My daddy's going to bring me a doll!

OLGA—I asked him for something useful; something that I need. A dress is very useful and so is a sash. I hope he will think a blue ribbon for my hair is useful, too.

FREDERICK—I wanted a sled, but a pair of mittens or a stick of candy would do. *Anything* would do, just so it was *something.*

WIFE—(*putting her hand lovingly on Frederick's head*) That's my good boy. Always pleased with little, and always willing to give up when necessary. Children, you must remember that your father is a poor man and works hard in the forest all day so that we may have enough to eat and clothes to keep us warm. He has no money to buy the pretty things you saw in the shops down in the town.

FREDERICK—Won't he bring us *anything?*

WIFE—I hope so, dear. I'm *sure* he will bring *something.* You mustn't be disappointed, though, if it isn't what you wanted. (*As she has spoken she has moved uneasily to the window and looked out. She speaks again from there.*) I don't see what is keeping your father so long. It is later, even, than last night.

OLGA—Perhaps he is in the town buying presents for us.

JOHN—He promised, really promised, to stop work early and buy presents for us in the town.

WIFE—John, boy, run out to the yard gate and see if he is coming.

FREDERICK—I'll go, too. (*But John has already snatched up a cap and has run out.*)

WIFE—Never mind, Son. Some other time you can go.

JOHN—(*coming in quickly*) Hurrah! He's coming! I can see his lantern shining on the snow more than half way up from the town. Oh, I hope he has my dog.

HENRY—And I hope he has my skates and my red cap and my goat—

ELIZ.—And my dolly with real hair, and a pink—

FRED.—And my sled, or at least *something* for me.

OLGA—I hope he has my blue ribbon!

WIFE—Come. Let's sing our Christmas song again.

We'll leave the door open a little and then he will hear us singing and hurry. But John, did you say you saw his lantern? Surely, that couldn't be. He has never taken a lantern. He always leaves the forest before dark, and there are no wolves between us and the town.

JOHN—Perhaps he borrowed one. I saw a light shining on the snow, anyway. Come on. Let's sing our song.

(*They join hands and dance around the tree, singing, as at the opening of the scene. The Wife stands by the window looking out. Near the end of the carol she goes to the door and opens it, standing as if awaiting the Woodcutter, who comes in and interrupts the carol before it is finished. He carries the Child, wrapped in his coat, in his arms. The children crowd around him as on the previous night, but quietly since they see the bundle in his arms. He sits on a bench near the front of the stage. The others group themselves around him. They suddenly seem to realize that so small a bundle cannot contain their wished-for gifts.*)

JOHN—Couldn't you find a dog? Even a little one?

OLGA—I guess my dress was too heavy for you to carry.

FRED.—I said *anything* would do, so it was *something*; although I did want a sled.

HENRY—My red cap might be in a bundle no larger than that, and maybe my skates, but a goat—

ELIZ.—It's just big enough to be my dolly. I *hope* she has a pink dress and real hair.

WOODCUTTER—No, 'Lizbeth, it isn't a doll with a pink dress, but it has real hair and you can play with it. (*To Henry*:) It isn't a goat to draw you about in a cart. You must draw it. (*To Frederick*:) It's ever so much more fun than a sled. (*To Olga*:) It isn't a dress for you. You must find a dress for it. (*To John*:) It cannot, like a dog, scare the wolves away from you. You will have to protect *it*. (*He opens the bundle and shows the Child, a baby, wrapped in a ragged wool scarf such*

as men wear about their necks when working out of doors in winter. They all show varying degrees of astonishment.)

ELIZ.—(*who has felt of the Child's head*) It has real hair!

HENRY—If I had a goat and a cart it could ride every day.

FRED.—I can make a sled for it to ride on.

OLGA—One of my dresses would be too large but I can make a small one if Mother helps me.

JOHN—(*shaking his head*) Now, we really do need a dog to watch this baby.

WIFE—Whose child is it, and where did you get it? Look, it hasn't any clothes! Where *did* you get it?

WOODCUTTER—I found it. As I promised, I left my work early to stop in the town and buy presents. Just as I was near the edge of the forest, I heard the same cry that I told you of hearing last night. It seemed to come from a thicket at my right. It was still daylight, so I thought nothing could harm me and I went to the thicket and looked but there was nothing there. I thought I had imagined the sound, and started on. At once the cry came again, this time from behind me. I thought it must be an animal, but it sounded so much like the cry of a child that I went back and looked. There wasn't any living thing there. I was getting uneasy by this time, and started home again as fast as I could walk. Before I had taken ten steps the cry came again, louder than before. This time it seemed to come from my right, and it sounded exactly like a child crying with the cold. I looked in the bushes at the right of the path, and there, lying on the snow with nothing on, was this baby. I put my scarf about it and wrapped it in my coat and so came home. When I came to the town I remembered my promise to look for gifts I could buy, but the baby needed food and shelter and I hurried home. So, children, this

is the only gift I have for you and you must share it among you, caring for it by turns so that your mother will not be burdened too much. What do you say?

FRED.—I think it is the very nicest gift we could have.

ELIZ.—It hasn't a pink dress, but it has real hair. I like it better than a doll.

HENRY—I don't know what a boy's going to do with a baby, but it's all right. You couldn't leave it in the snow to freeze.

OLGA—I shall have such fun making a dress for it. Maybe, 'Lizbeth, it can be a pink one.

JOHN—I'll help Fred make a sled for it to ride on. We need another baby, now, 'Lizbeth is getting so big.

WIFE—What shall we do with it? Where shall it sleep? 'Lizbeth's cradle is broken. Let me see—

JOHN—(*dragging a box from under the table*) I got this for my dog to sleep in. It's long enough for this baby.

OLGA—(*who has gone out and returned with a small pillow.*) Here's my pillow. I don't need it.

ELIZ.—Put my little shawl over it. Put my little shawl over it.

(*The Wife begins to put the Child to bed in the box. The Woodcutter stands looking on, as do the children who presently begin to sing a carol softly as they watch. "Silent Night, Holy Night," or a similar carol would be suitable. The curtain falls just as the carol ends.*)

CURTAIN

ACT III.

(*Christmas morning.*)

(*The room is empty. It remains as at the end of Act II, except that the Child is no longer in the box. It has been replaced by gifts but the change is not apparent. Soon after the curtain rises, the Wife comes in, looks around, and then turns to the door and calls the children.*)

WIFE—John! 'Lizbeth! Children! Come, it is Christmas morning. Come and greet the day—the birthday of our Lord. (*She kneels back of the box, facing the audience, and begins to lift the covering from the Child when the children rush in, laughing and talking, and exchanging greetings. "Happy Day!" "Good Cheer to all!" "Merry Christmas!" They gather around the box.*)

ELIZ.—I want to see my dolly baby!

WIFE—The child's not here! Olga, where is it? Someone must have hidden it! This is no time to be playing tricks. Bring it at once!

OLGA—I didn't hide it. Why, I haven't even been in this room since last night. How could I hide it? Besides, since Father brought it to us last night, I haven't wanted to play tricks on anybody. It seems as though everybody is my friend.

ELIZ.—(*who has been investigating the contents of the box*) Why, here's my dolly with a pink dress. And real hair! Oh, Daddy, you did get me a dolly, after all.

(*The other children begin to discover gifts in the box or near it.*)

HENRY—Some skates! St. Nicholas brought me some skates! (*He sits on the floor to try them on.*)

OLGA—What a pretty sash! And a blue ribbon! And here's my dress! Oh, how happy I am!

FRED.—See here! Here's my sled. Now I can give the new baby a ride. But where is the new baby?

JOHN—(*after looking all around, has finally found a basket or box under the table, with a tiny puppy in it.*) And here's my dog! He's pretty little, but I guess he'll grow, and then he can watch the baby. Hasn't anybody seen the baby?

WIFE—It was too little to get out of the box and crawl away. Some of you must have hidden it. Come, children, a joke's all right but this has gone far enough, especially as your father was kind enough to walk back to the town after we were asleep to get these gifts for you.

WOODCUTTER—I bought no gifts. I never saw these things before. Children, where is the baby? Where have you hidden it? John, where is it?

JOHN—Honest, Daddy, I haven't seen it. Why should I hide it?

WOODCUTTER—Olga, do you know?

OLGA—No, indeed! I wouldn't take it out of its warm bed this cold morning.

WOODCUTTER—Henry?

HENRY—I didn't touch it.

WOODCUTTER—Frederick?

FRED.—No.

WOODCUTTER—'Lizbeth is too small to have lifted it, so where can it be?

WIFE—It must be in the house, somewhere. You look in the other room, Olga, while we look here. (*After a thorough search.*) No, there's no trace of the Child, anywhere!

WOODCUTTER—(*aside to Wife*) Where did the gifts come from, Wife?

WIFE—I thought you must have gone to the town again after we were asleep.

WOODCUTTER—I didn't stir out of bed until this morning, and I haven't been out of your sight since. Where could they have come from? You didn't get them, did you?

WIFE—No.

ELIZ.—(*who is playing with the doll*) This is a nice doll, but I wish I had my real baby.

OLGA—It was such a pretty baby. I never saw such a pretty baby in my life, before. Its face shone like the candles on the altar.

FREDERICK—(*pulling at his mother's arm and speaking in an uncertain way, as though puzzled*) Do you suppose—do you suppose—it could be the Christ Child? It is said the Christ Child sometimes visits good people.

ELIZ.—Who is the Christ Child, Mother? Tell me about the Christ Child. (*The children gather around the Woodcutter and the Wife, near the front of the stage.*)

WIFE—I only know what some folks say. They say that sometimes the Christ Child comes down from Heaven and appears to people just as this child came to us. If the people take the Child in and care for it, everybody in that house will be well and happy for a whole year. No one who sees it will speak an ugly or unkind word all the year, but will be loving and gentle.

OLGA—I haven't wanted to say a single hateful word since Father brought this Child home last night.

WOODCUTTER—I remember now! A strange light seemed to shine around us as I brought the Child home.

WIFE—That was what John saw. He thought you had borrowed a lantern. It was the glory of God shining around the Christ Child!

FRED.—I don't often want to say hateful words, but I never felt so happy and sort of friendly before.

WOODCUTTER—And the gifts! They couldn't come in by themselves. Only the Christ Child could have wrought that miracle!

WIFE—It *is* a miracle! Indeed it is! The Christ Child has visited us! What a happy and thankful family we shall be, not only for a year, but for all the years of our lives!

CURTAIN

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